

1996

# Friends, family, foes

Adrienne Patrice Lamberti  
*Iowa State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Lamberti, Adrienne Patrice, "Friends, family, foes" (1996). *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*. 16092.  
<https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/16092>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [digirep@iastate.edu](mailto:digirep@iastate.edu).

Friends, family, foes

by

Adrienne Patrice Lamberti

A Thesis Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English  
Major: English (Creative Writing)

Approved:

---

In Charge of Major Work

---

For the Major Department

---

For the Graduate College

Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa

1996

...It was a kind of love that tuckered me out while returning no great reward, and maybe that is how it's meant to be, so that sooner or later a child will realize love is more wisely invested elsewhere than in a parent.

But at the time I was still locked into a habit of deep devotion and could not have got out of it if I'd tried. Most love works that way: you can't get out until its natural term is up.

--Rich in Love

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>FAMILY TREE</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>FRIDAY AFTERNOON CLUB</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>BUNK</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>THE GENETIC SHAFT</b>	<b>41</b>

## FAMILY TREE

"Lamberti... Lamberti... you must be Italian."

That remark is commonplace, and yet it always confuses me and tempts me to look around. It's been uttered at roll calls, parties, handshaken introductions. On a wall in my childhood bedroom is a mock street sign proclaiming *Parking for Irish Only*, and on my childhood bed is an afghan knitted in the Irish knot. Why was the Italian reference directed at *me*?

The answer is obvious--it's that blazing *i* again. The last letter in my last name, a constant reminder to my maternal Irish family that my mother married far beneath her. While I always think of myself as Irish, no one else ever seems to notice. It's always the other half, the Italian half, that invokes questions and assumptions--

"Do you speak Italian?" My best friend in first grade didn't know any better.

"I'll bet you have a temper." Businessmen love this question.

"Do you eat a lot of pasta?" This one mostly from stupid people, the ones who think all Italians look, talk and act like Tony Danza.

Damn that letter *i*.

Had it ended with my name, my Mediterranean side would have been only mildly irritating. But it runs into my body. I have the eyes and the nose and the sluggish metabolism. There were methods to remedy such flaws. No one argued against my request for the surgery that shaved the Italian bump out of my nose. No one intervened during the year I stopped eating to make my body equally slim.

Half-sighted like my father's, with the promise of future blindness, my eyes also have his color. Only while mine are dachhound, his are more dobermann, smart and mean. As for my nose and body, they simply were visual errors. I'd inherited the Lamberti profile, a wide nose with a high bump in the bridge. It flashed out at me in every mirror. Ugly, I thought.

Ugly, ugly, *ugly*. Especially when my mother and the rest of her family breathed through a slim and patrician nose. It was the one trait that equally annoyed both sides of my family.

"If you want to get a nose job," my father unexpectedly announced, "I'd be willing to kick in some money for it." My father, who would not help pay for my college tuition. Evidently some things are worth any expense.

Once my nose was corrected, the next goal was my body. Every Lamberti family gathering was an ethnic Weight Watchers meeting--my aunt Mary and Judy would discuss fat-free pastas and exercise classes while my grandmother passed around low-cholesterol vanilla wafers. Yet their fear didn't even approximate my mother's, as she sat with me in a restaurant one day and watched me eat.

"You'd better watch out," Mom said. "You'll wind up like your aunt Judy." Judy was five feet tall and very round. I watched out until I was sick.

There is nothing that can be done, however, about my lack of height that is glaringly obvious when compared to that of my mother's family. I am Gulliver in a Celtic Brobdingnag. My measly five and a half feet couldn't hold their own against my brother's skyrocketing adolescent growth. He and Mom would speed away from me, training me into a now habitual race-walk just to keep up. "C'mon, Shorty!" my mother teased.

And so it cannot be ignored, because the evidence is right before my family's collective blue and hazel eyes. *I am not one of them*, not completely, not by half. My mother can marry an Italian man, but she will still be 5'8" and able to trace her ancestry back to a single green country in the north. And when she divorced my father, it reversed her mistake. My brother and I weren't so lucky. Pulled in opposite directions by our families, we struggled to figure out where we belonged--and who we belonged to.

Our last names were no help in the process. After the divorce, Matt and I found a desperate catharsis in asking Mom to take back her maiden name. "You're not a Lamberti,"

we would repeatedly insist. Our request was both self-affirming and self-denying. We believed that legal ties severed blood ties as well.

It took seven years of pleading before my mother "fixed" her name. It meant changing official documents--calling the electric company, the credit card companies, all of the blind institutions that couldn't see that obviously my mother was not a Lamberti. The decision seemed deceptively casual when she mentioned it during a phone call.

"If you call me at work now, be sure to ask for Diane Hoover," she stated.

"You actually changed it?" I asked. "Really? That's great!"

"Well, not legally. I'd have to go to court to get my maiden name back."

"You'd have to *sue*?" The thought only made my name seem more binding.

\*\*\*

My brother and I were raised by a family that didn't want half of us. Dad's absence left no gaping hole because my mother's relatives filled it with relief that the Italian thorn in their side had finally been removed. They split us down the middle and discounted what they couldn't change.

It's quite a juggling act, but pitting one half of yourself against the other *can* be done. Isolation is the key. My mother's family submerged me. I went to Mass in an Irish settlement founded decades before my deposed County Clair predecessors arrived in Warren County, Iowa. I was not deaf to my grandmother's comment that my cousin had married a woman "with a good name."

The endorsement wasn't unanimous, however. While my grandmother, aunts and uncles welcomed the newest addition, my grandfather was not impressed. Nichol's good name apparently meant little to him, because he never said it aloud. Granddad did not participate in his family's banner-waving--his Irish background included a poverty-stricken childhood, a youth filled with hard manual labor, and a father tormented by alcohol. His family's willowy

height was good only for basketball and stacking haybales. Granddad looked beyond names and faces. Around him, my eyes could be brown.

Everyone else noticed, however, that I wasn't carrying around a pair of baby blues. I'd been given the genetic shaft. The Christmas after my parents' divorce, an uncle presented me with a genealogy tree that traced seven generations of my heritage. On the maternal half of the chart, the names were cleanly printed, straight human arrows pointing back to County Clair: *Hildebrand, Connor, Maroney, Blackford*. The space reserved for my father's name was blank.

It was the only present that particular uncle has ever given to me. Larry wasn't even a blood relative, but he'd tediously traced the Kings back to their genesis, the year when they vanished from Church records. That he'd spelled my name "Adrienne" on the gift tag wasn't the point. My relatives were fascinated.

"Pass that around," an aunt called, and the heavy paper was scrutinized by several pairs of blue eyes. My father had been an in-law for fifteen years. No one noticed his absence from the tree.

Even without my uncle's help, December 25th is an annual reminder of my dilemma. I always spend the morning with the family who raised me, and there's comfort in our undeviating and careful holiday rituals. There are stiff *thank yous* for gifts that by now are rote: a wrench set for Joe, leather work gloves for Jerry, Wal-Mart gift certificates for my aunts, and the occasional daring liquor flask, buried in wrapping paper but never opened--we all know what it is. The raunchiest thing our family can come up with is a thirty-year-old bottle of cheap cologne, passed as a gag gift from one victim to another and accompanied by a mildly joking letter from the previous year's recipient. The newest in-law usually falls prey to the gift, a concrete affirmation of family acceptance. My cousin Steve's wife, however, did not receive it, never received it. They divorced last year.



I'm untangled from this web long enough to visit the Lambertis, who immediately hug me, but long ago I grew out of their reach and they can't squeeze my face anymore. Over everyone's heads towers my brother, who clutches his Raiders ballcap and doesn't take his coat off until someone grabs it from him. I've now entered a Mediterranean Lilliput, filled with olive-skinned, tactile people who shout everything, even to the person sitting next to them on the couch. It takes minutes before my grandfather is heard to announce the meal. My brother and I, who spend the other 364 days of the year arguing, never leave each other's side. My chin touches the top of my grandmother's head as she hugs me and asks me how school is going. What do my cousins think, as they sit next to us and toss dinner rolls across the table? "Who are these people, the two mute giants?" I ignore the tortellini soup and pasta frita, having already eaten. For as long as I've had my driver's license, I have been the first to leave every year. *I am not one of them.*

\*\*\*

December of 1994 demanded a commitment from me: which side would I choose? In the week before Christmas, both my Irish grandfather and Italian grandmother were hospitalized. Each family staked their claim on me, my mother's family calling first dibs because Granddad was the first to fall ill.

The first phone call came a week before finals. "You need to come home as soon as your tests are over," my mother informed me.

"How is he?"

"The doctors have increased the cumiden, but that's not helping relieve all of the fluid that's built up in his tissues."

"How's he doing?" I tried again.

"Oh, you know Granddad," Mom said. "Grouchy as ever. He doesn't want to be there."

The second call came four days later from my father. "Well, here's what's going on, Adrienne," he greeted me. I let him talk without interruption. A phone call from Dad meant something was wrong. "Your Nana had a stroke, yes, and she's pretty bad, and they have her on a respirator. She's paralyzed, she's pretty bad. Nana had a real close call this time. She's at Mercy and it would be nice if you came down and saw her."

"Okay--"

--What, what are you doing now? What's going on right now, do you have tests or are you in classes or... when are you going to have a break up there, or maybe you're already on break right now.... "

"I'm in finals."

"Well, okay, then, I don't know your schedule, you'll just have to come down whenever you're able. You should finish your schoolwork. Don't miss anything important or skip something. Do you have a break after this?"

"Uh, by Thursday I'll be done," I said.

"Okay, good, that's good. You can come down then and see Nana and also see your grandfather. How's he doing? Did you mom say how he's doing?"

"I think he's really sick this time."

"God. Okay, well, I'll see you whenever you get here, then, but you should come down here and see Nana."

"I will. I'll be done Thursday."

Into each hospital room I carried a nice flower arrangement and torn loyalties. I had to be careful--otherwise I'd get confused and wind up kissing my grandfather and joking with my grandmother about beer. In Granddad's room, the nurses came and went with a distanced, professional aura while I sat quietly and tried not to get in the way. Across town in the Catholic hospital, Nana's room was smaller, crowded with machines and bouquets and a large

crucifix on the south wall. Relatives bustled in and out, chatting. Every afternoon, a smiling nun arrived to offer communion and ask in a loud voice how Nana was doing.

Both of my families had gathered strength against their tragedies and expected me to show my colors and contribute to the fort. "You're going over to the other hospital, aren't you?" was always thrown at me when I'd leave my grandfather or grandmother's bedside.

"Well, fine, then, go!" my Italian grandfather had yelled at me. "If you have to go, go." He flapped his hand, not looking at me.

"Man, Grandpa seemed a little upset," my brother ventured when we had escaped to the hospital parking lot.

Well-trained, we *did* go over to the other hospital after visiting Nana. One late afternoon, I walked into Granddad's room, dark except for the glow of a small light over his bed. He was lying down, but not asleep. His hands were resting warily to not disturb the IV. He'd been staring at the holiday poinsettia that stood nearby, but turned his head when I tip-toed in and for a minute had acted as if he didn't recognize me. We talked about the snowfall and my brother's temperamental truck and my students. Granddad said he was going to be home in time for Christmas. Whether this was true or not was moot--he'd made up his mind.

"Just pull the car around in front," he joked, "and I'll meet you down there."

Christmas became a staged play. My mother's family crowded around our recently released patriarch and ate baked ham and commented on the snowfall. My uncle and cousins set up the brand-new television set, complete with a remote control so my grandfather wouldn't have to move from his easy chair. They'd insisted on putting up the antenna immediately, even though it was well below freezing. Nobody argued with them. I had been surprised at the financial extravagance of the gift until I realized that the TV was only an expensive prop. Not a single reference was made about my grandfather's hospital stay, even

though both of his hands still wore band-aids from the IVs. Everyone laughed frequently. Old-school Catholicism had trained us all well.

I gave Granddad a quilted flannel shirt because everyone knows how cold an Iowa winter could be. This one promised to be bitter. One week later I would return the shirt, still in its package, unopened and unneeded.

The Lambertis, however, did not even trade gifts. They grouped at an aunt's house and openly discussed my grandmother's doctor and the hospital and how to handle Grandpa. I squirmed at the blunt emotion that moved through this family. No one blinked when my uncle, a respected businessman with silver hair, covered his face and started to cry. My aunt Mary told Grandpa to "take a chill pill" and he stomped out the door. My father and aunt Judy then proceeded to argue in front of the entire family.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but Dad expects us to drop everything and go running to the hospital every time he calls, and I just can't do that," my father said.

"Oh, God, Tom," my aunt snapped. "That's not the case at all."

"Well, that's the impression I'm getting, and there's just no way I can spend all day at the hospital just to keep Dad away from the doctors."

My cousins talked to each other and refilled their plates, apparently oblivious to the debate between my father and aunt. I said nothing, unsure of my place in such heated, determined, *open* conversations--I'd had no experience in this kind of atmosphere. This time, it was my brother, not me, who was the first to leave. Evidently he'd chosen *his* family.

\*\*\*

Unlike Matt, I couldn't gravitate naturally to the family who most resembled me. I was no 6'2", skinny kid with hazel eyes. And underneath my outcast features were a swarm of newly developing questions about my supposedly "superior" family. I never before had challenged what I was taught. Not once did the word *bigoted* cross my mind. My family was

working class, it was a farm family, maybe even a little redneck, but bigots? Their attitude toward the Lambertis didn't fall under scrutiny because my filial assimilation had been so thorough. I'd heard my relatives carelessly toss around epithets about Hispanics and African-Americans, words that made me cringe and leave the room, but I couldn't perceive how their small-mindedness was no less insulting when they turned it towards my brother and me.

When I left for college, however, I moved not only my lamp and books and clothes but also my perspective, and in the distance I put between myself and my family the chorus of questions became louder. My relatives were no longer around to throw back mirror images of who I was and was not supposed to be. I could be Adrienne Lamberti, period. Not Adrienne Lamberti, whose grandmother was a King. Whose family was well-known in the St. Mary's Catholic district, an Irish district that was rapidly shrinking. During one Mass I attended shortly before leaving for college, I noticed that most of the congregation was my grandmother's age. Their children and grandchildren already had fled years ago, leaving only the elderly parishoners to defend their "good names." Their absence seemed to validate my desertion as well.

In college, I was an active voter, and one day while I was leaving a precinct building I was struck by the necessity of having a voter registration card. In my hometown a few years earlier, I didn't need to brandish any form of identification because the women operating the voting booth had already identified me--but not as a Lamberti.

"I registered in another county," I admitted. "Can I still vote here?"

While one of the women made an inquiry phone call, I stood apart and felt their eyes on me. "Well, you know who *that* is," one lady whispered. "That's Winifred's granddaughter!"

"I'm Diane's oldest," I clarified.

Three heads nodded in recognition. The registration problem was suddenly resolved. Smiling, the women had waved me into the voting booth. Telling them my last name would have meant nothing to them.

And at the time it meant nothing to me. "Lamberti" only suggested the long explanations I would have to make to people who knew my Irish family but didn't understand how I fit into it. Every year I would meet my grandparents' associates at state fairs and dairy business conferences and to them I'd recite, "I'm Diane's oldest." I never failed to explain my blood tie to anyone, but even then I wasn't fully redeemed because my audience would always reply, "Well, you sure don't look like anyone in your family!"

The August before my grandfather died, one of his friends offered some hope. I walked through the cattle barn at the state fair, greeting acquaintances and answering questions about Granddad's health and of course, my relation to the family. After being reminded that I was Diane's oldest, one of my grandfather's friends sat back in his lawn chair and stared at me for a moment. "Yeah," he said. "You remind me of your mother."

I grinned. Maybe there'd been a metamorphosis in me, a turning of my eye color, a few unnoticed added inches of height. Maybe Bill had seen beyond physicality to the change underneath my skin, a timorous inching away from my family and its imposed identity. Or maybe he just had cataracts.

My mother, who was standing a few feet away, overheard his comment. "Poor kid," she muttered.

\*\*\*

It wasn't until college that there was a chance to make my name mean something--if I wanted to. During four years in a family-less environment, then, I was only Adrienne Lamberti. My friends shaped me instead. Without my family shield, though, I was transformed into an Italian and all of its accompanying connotations. One friend jokingly

referred to me as "Adriano" because under her blonde Norweigan head was the idea that all Italians' names ended in *-ano*.

"Are you serious?" I asked.

Karen stared at me. "I thought *-ano* meant an Italian name," she asserted.

"Well, it can, but Italian names end in all sorts of ways," I said. It was hard to come up with examples. I could spot an Irish name immediately, but Italian? My family's training had been thorough. Karen waited for me to enlighten her.

"They usually end in vowels," I suggested. She was not listening to an authority on the subject.

There weren't many others at college who could add to the conversation. The only other readily-identifiable Italian at our bleached Methodist school was Jen Angarano, and she would frequently express her desire to go back home to New York, an exponentially more diverse environment. It didn't take long before I was tired of fending off questions about my eye color or my supposed love of lasagna. I began to notice how often the slurs *Wop* and *dago* were thrown around. This identity wasn't working, either. Still, away from my family, I would occasionally pretend that cutting the ropes to my background was possible--until the holidays came around again to remind me.

I dreaded Christmas in 1995.

Both families had lost something, maybe that last remnant cohesiveness that was located in Granddad and Nana. My maternal family gathered as usual. According to Grandma, the holiday would be simple, no fuss. We were all to report to the farm on Christmas Eve Day, eat an obscene amount of food, exchange gifts. There was no notable difference in procedure. No one mentioned Granddad's name. Grandma had decorated the house by herself, a job I usually helped with during my holiday break. This year there were

vague excuses, things that would unexpectedly come up to keep me from the farm until I finally had no choice, I had to go.

The little Christmas tree with the ratty felt ornaments again stood at one end of the living room. "I was going to throw that old thing out," Grandma said. "But last Christmas I was so busy that I just tossed it on the woodpile, and wouldn't you know, this year when I went downstairs to get the Christmas decorations, it was still lying in a corner by some logs! So I just brought it back upstairs."

Several uncles asked my brother how he liked his new job at Pioneer, whether he was working with silage or assigned to a testing lab. My uncle Jerry then turned to me. "So, Lefty, what are you doing now?" he asked.

"Oh, still taking classes, still teaching."

He frowned, puzzled. "What'd you do, flunk out? I thought you were all done with classes!"

"Oh, no, I won't get my degree from Iowa State until May."

"Iowa State!" Jerry looked around for assistance. "What are you doing up there?"

It was my turn to stare. "This is my *second* year in Ames." Granddad had been so happy about my decision to go to ISU, always asking me how my classes were going. Suddenly, my inclusion in the family seemed much more precarious than my brother's.

Grandma dropped hints that she needed a chauffeur to go to Mass on Christmas Day. On the other side of my world, the Lambertis had planned to assemble on December 25, now that Nana was reestablished in her home. Dad had ordered my brother to pass along an invitation to me.

"Are you going?" I asked Matt.

He shrugged. "Yeah, I probably won't stay long. I gotta help with the milking this week, so I need to be at the farm by three. Are *you* going?" he asked.



The options were clear, but clear choices aren't always easy ones. On Christmas Day, I sat in St. Patrick's church with Grandma and wondered if it was a sin to choose one family over another.

\*\*\*

So now I stand somewhere between County Clair, Ireland and Riccovolto, Italy, trying to figure out which direction to go--north or south? There's no room among Kings for a short, dark-eyed woman who let herself openly cry at her grandfather's funeral. There's no room among Lambertis for a tall, pale-skinned woman who stiffened every time her now-paralyzed grandmother tackled her for a hug. My two choices accompany me as I move among family, friends, and new worlds--pulling away from each influence only to run towards a different one.

When I was five, I was similarly sandwiched between both my paternal and maternal grandparents, who in my parents' house sat distinct from one another like two pairs of salt and pepper shakers. I was too young to notice anything except the screaming silence among the four of them. My father talked to his parents, and my mother talked to hers. It is my only memory of a union between my two halves. Once, County Clair met Riccovolto, but they never came together again.

### FRIDAY AFTERNOON CLUB

All of Mexico celebrated my 21st birthday--it was Cinco de Mayo, and even though the Corn State was cultural eons away from Mexican tradition, every place in our small Iowa college town was running some kind of tequila special. Not that we needed an excuse. My friends were bar veterans long before I had ever taken a tentative first sip of what I'd been assured was "good stuff."

As usual, we celebrated at the Spence Account bar, more a force of habit than a conscious decision. Our choice spot was a table downstairs, partially shaded by the empty boxes that once housed Budweiser 40-ouncers, or what the rednecks at school referred to as "torpedos." It had taken us a few months to accustom ourselves to blinking from the smoke and yelling over the jukebox, but by May we were official regulars, and that reputation, coupled with the special birthday occasion, warranted sitting *at* the bar.

Amy and Elizabeth and I hunched over the smooth black stretch of bartop, mugs in hand. Poking fun at my English major, Elizabeth raised her glass in a toast. "To Adrienne," she joked, "Tonight against the dark sky, the stars have arranged themselves into the shape of a celestial beer can. 'Tis beauteous." Our mugs clanked.

Elizabeth's humor couldn't be outdone, that much we'd learned. Amy and I just laughed. We were merely satellites. A person who is the center of attention achieves that position not only because she wants it, but because everyone else wants it for her. Elizabeth was comfortable in her post. I gravitated towards her naturally. She seemed like the best model to emulate, better than drawing upon any of my own experience to guide me.

Later that night, I tripped over the electrical cord to the blaring jukebox and in the ensuing silence had my own fifteen minutes of unwanted fame. That was also the night we'd heard the rumblings of a friendship about to blow apart, but we didn't pay much attention. We were too busy fixing the jukebox.

Elizabeth had even picked up the tab. It was a pleasant surprise and an honor, considering that she was the one Amy and I admired and strove to impress, and with that ten dollar bill she conferred her approval of me. This was a good birthday.

It was Amy's turn for a toast. Our raised mugs were reminiscent of a Bud Light commercial. "Only one more year," Amy said.

I grinned. Elizabeth nodded and drank. "What the hell am I going to do," she muttered.

"What about U of I?" Amy asked. We were all planning on graduate school.

Elizabeth leaned back. "I want a student's life without the work," she said. "That's my problem." Her head swiveled in my direction. "God," she said, so low that I had to strain to hear her words above the music. "I am so afraid of winding up alone."

\*\*\*

Elizabeth, with her ever-changing hair color and love of the remote *New York Times*, was our natural ringleader. She'd figured herself out a long time ago. While the rest of us suffered and were still in a college that didn't approve of outspoken women, she was far from reticent. "How can anyone educated be a conservative?" she once goaded during a poli sci class, then sat back and grinned as the president of the College Republicans turned red. The professor hid a smile.

It was her endless commentary that caught my attention. What kind of woman had the strength to attack students, challenge ideas, and swear in front of tenured faculty? A card-carrying mute in the classroom, I was impressed. Until I hooked up with Those Damn Feminists--as they were labeled by most of our college peers--I was listlessly riding on the school's apostolic bandwagon. It was an easy thing to do with such a homogenous student population. Some people took pride in the fact that our private Iowa college was the fifth

whitest in the nation. Elizabeth and Amy, however, had managed to rise above the cultural dearth of their small Iowa hometowns, and in me they recognized similar potential.

It must have been luck that they'd seen something beyond my Wal-Mart wardrobe and eighteen years of farm life. Maybe it was my desire to distance myself from the very elements that had constructed me as that farm kid, a buried liberal sympathy. A dread of being consumed by my family and its life. College, however, was filled with small-town kids who were just like me--except they packed their bags every Friday night and eagerly headed home.

I stubbornly remained on campus with the naive good intentions of becoming "educated." It was either that or spending the rest of my life within a mile of my family. Several of my high school classmates already had been sentenced to that sort of existence. The prospect terrified me, beyond the usual teenage fear of never escaping from a hometown. College, even a small-town college, suggested newness and freedom from my family's push-pull influence. I could determine my own direction. Somehow, Amy and Elizabeth had identified my differentness. They wanted my company, both the Italian and Irish parts--and whatever else was there, waiting to announce itself. I was lucky they found me.

It had been the three of us who challenged thirty classmates, jammed into a stuffy basement classroom for Women's Literature. As we studied Sojourner Truth's speeches, one well-dressed junior said that while she felt sorry that "negroes" were enslaved, she still believed that Truth's speeches were too "pushy." Others nodded in agreement. Amy and Liz and I sat in a group, mortified. "Excuse me, did you just say *negroes*?" Elizabeth gasped. "It's not the nineteenth century, for Christ's sake."

Amy cleared her throat. "That term carries very negative connotations that demonstrated blacks' inferior status during the Civil War era."

No one was swayed. Elizabeth's temper was usually balanced by Amy's level-headedness, even though it was Amy who had more at stake on campus. Underneath her

rational tone was an occasional flare of defiance. Most often it was manifested through her clothes. No one else, even Elizabeth, ignored fashion taboos. Doing so meant snide comments and side-long glances that are ostensibly common only to high school cliques. Our collegiate peers seemed to retain the talent for snobbery, though. I slunk through crowds of Eddie Bauer and J Crew models and hoped they wouldn't notice that my shoes were Target clearance stock. Amy, who kept her hair chopped short and crossed the forbidden line between women and men's clothing, didn't seem to care. She sported a ratty flannel shirt and hiking boots while trying to rationalize her liberal views to a classroom full of nonbelievers.

One day she began to wear a chain of multi-colored rings to her outfit.

"What are those?" I asked.

"Freedom rings." Amy watched me closely as she spoke.

"Oh." I didn't understand their appeal. Neither the chain nor the rings were especially striking.

"Troy gave them to me," Amy said.

Troy was one of Amy's friends from Omaha. She had once mentioned that he was gay, a fact that had at first rattled my unexposed senses. Amy frequently visited Omaha on the weekends and returned with talk of Troy and his boyfriend and other friends she'd visited. At first, the topics shocked me a little, clashing against my familiar and strictly heterosexual comfort zone. My family had planted a deep and ignorant fear in me of anything "weird," including homosexuality. Like all other beliefs that grew out of my background, though, this fear also would be challenged by my friends. In time, I ceased doing a double-take whenever Amy uttered the word "gay."

"Rings like these are common in, uh, alternative communities," she added.

"You mean liberal communities?" I asked.

Amy paused for a moment. "Well, yeah. Sort of. Places where the boundaries are drawn a little differently."

I laughed. "This place is as far as you can get from alternative!"

Amy also laughed and shook her head.

\*\*\*

Few people ever wanted to sit near us, which was just fine. As long as we had each other's support, the other students' intolerance could be endured. It was a curious education, and the three of us responded with a steady edging to the left and opinion columns in the school paper. The campus responded in turn, with crank calls and ad hominem letters to the editor. There were several protests against reverse discrimination following my cover story on Women's History Month. "We don't have a Men's History Month," wrote a student. "Why do women get a special article?"

My mother didn't understand the liberal turn her obedient daughter was taking. "Be careful," she warned me. "You're such a radical now!"

Amy and Elizabeth laughed after I would repeat a phone conversation to them. "Be careful, be careful!" Elizabeth joked. "Adrienne, you couldn't be any more careful, trust me."

I stopped sending my paper clippings home. Had Mom seen the other articles, her confusion would have been resolved upon the realization that my peers had corrupted me. My mother joined a large group of our critics. One of Elizabeth's columns, an invective against book banning at the city library, was razed by a local resident's response in the following week's paper. The only column that met with approval was Liz's tongue-in-cheek salute to turning twenty-one. "It's Miller Time!" she cheered, and the campus cheered with her. Her topic selection surprised me. Was she tired of writing about feminism and Sarajevo?

"I have to write about something else that endears me to the male population," she said after a classmate complimented Elizabeth on her article.

I started to chuckle, then glanced at her. She wasn't joking.

\*\*\*

On Fridays Amy, Elizabeth and I fled to the Spence Account--boozing refugees--and huddled in the dark corners. There, our critics ignored us, distracted by the pool games. Our "Friday Afternoon Club" at Spence was too well established that we were indifferent to the opening of a new bar during October of our senior year. The new Sports Club, however, soon merited most of the college students' patronage. The buzz on campus claimed this bar was clean and cheap and best of all, had a superior CD jukebox (collegiate praise could go no higher.)

Curiosity lured the three of us there, rather unwillingly (loyalty was loyalty, after all), but the \$3 pitcher special soon took the edge off our guilt. The heavily advertised five 30" television sets were tuned to football on ESPN and a crowd of guys in one corner were tuned to the sets. "Touchdown!" the TV boomed. The viewers yelled and chugged. A huge poster of B.J. Armstrong hung in one corner, already ripped and beer-stained. Another glossy poster, this one displaying the Hooters Girls in their low-cut neon finery, decorated the opposite corner. In truth, it wasn't the safest spot for members of the Liberal Conspiracy. Elizabeth hooked up with some acquaintances, but Amy and I watched the Pi Phi's drink and flirt their way through the crowd. This place was more their style. I drew a mustache on a Hooters Girl.

"Two thumbs down," Amy muttered.

Elizabeth, however, had enjoyed herself. An occasional flash of her dark sweater could be glimpsed among the Champion sweatshirts as she moved from jukebox to bar to table. She loved conversation. Elizabeth was more social and fearless than Amy and I, scoffing at our protests that the place was too crowded. When disguised as friendship, peer pressure isn't recognizable, and we didn't detect the insult when she called us wallflowers.

"This is much better than Spence," she asserted. "I think sometimes you're too paranoid about all the ditto-heads." We didn't protest when she declared the Sports Club our new haven. Elizabeth was right about everything else, so maybe the new bar deserved another chance.

The Sports Club slowly grew on us. But it was still too bright, especially during the late afternoon happy hour, when the sun would pour into the huge glass windows and through the beer pitchers. It was the only thing about Spence that continued to hold an advantage over the new place--at Spence I could hide in the dark and watch everyone else work destruction on their brain cells. Our Friday Afternoon Club usually convened during the happy hour--three official members and our occasional guests. Elizabeth was the only one who ever mingled, but Amy and I preferred our isolation. We sat alone and regarded the scene.

The other students' behavior always amazed me. A bunch of white kids whose parents paid for everything. Loud, conservative, and frightening. Much like the college we attended. I fed dollars into the jukebox and tried to relax, heedful that when happy hour ended, I had to study or else lose my scholarship. The rest of the populace would later spread the Friday night cheer throughout the campus in a drunken domino effect. From our vantage point--a table near the dartboards--Amy and I presented a united front, falsely contemptuous and truly afraid of our classmates' attitudes.

While Elizabeth roamed and occasionally paused at our table for a refueling, Amy and I dived into conversations. Every experience at the Sports Club was accompanied by the vague feeling that I'd somehow missed out on the knowledge of the world. Where had I been while Elizabeth was reading stacks of newspapers and Amy was roaming Europe and studying socialist politics? Probably doing chores. Sitting behind a wall of glasses, Amy and Elizabeth talked around me about what they'd seen and what they hoped to see. I kept my ears open.



Beer was a blessing. It offered me a tentative voice, albeit a slurred one. One night, an unexpected moment of silence fell as I yelled to Amy, "I think television is the *real* opiate of the masses!"

Several heads turned toward our table. Elizabeth's laugh burst out from a corner. Amy's glance swung around the bar and landed on my burning face. "You're right," she said. "It really is." They encouraged a voice in me that had been smothered into dormancy. Occasionally, it spoke beyond my control, frightening me.

My biggest test of club membership occurred when Elizabeth marched into my room and announced that I was going with her to a rally for pro-choice activists. "It's going to be great," she raved. "Herbert Remer is going to be there."

"Who?" I asked.

"He's the only doctor in Iowa who will perform abortions now, because of that *fucking* David Shedlock and the rest of his Operation Rescue maniacs," Elizabeth said. "You should go. It'll be really good."

All of my family's conservatism rose up in protest as I debated. It wasn't a struggle about what I supported so much as why I supported it. Had there ever been an opportunity for me to decide what I believed? Amy and Elizabeth crashed through my long-held faith in the world, the blue-collar belief that hard work and no resistance was the best approach. I avoided giving Elizabeth an answer until the night of the rally, when my mother called to say hello. Some impetuous defiance in me made me confess.

"Oh, Adrienne," Mom sighed. "Those meetings are so full of crazies. You shouldn't take any chances."

Elizabeth walked into my room, jingling her car keys. "I have to get going, Mom," I suddenly concluded. "I'll talk to you later." Once again, my family had influenced my decision, although it certainly wasn't one that earned their approval.

My mother worried about my friends' influence over me, but our little group wasn't so secure. There was dissent among the ranks. During New Year's Eve, Amy went to Omaha to see some friends, one of whom, she said, was going to be in a drag show. I worked on graduate school applications. Elizabeth strode into the Sports Club and met a cigarette salesman named Brian. I was the lucky person who got to hear all about him two weeks later as we sat at our usual table. Elizabeth excitedly relayed the facts: well-employed, hard-working, funny.... I ordered another soda and told her I was happy for her. Amy also echoed the sentiment.

We didn't see much of Elizabeth for the next month, so roll call of the Friday Afternoon Club only consisted of two disgruntled members. Elizabeth's romance alarmed us. Our initial good tidings for her had faded when we met her new love, then watched him drink himself into a loud, foul-mouthed tirade about politics, women and the work world. Evidently being well-employed had its drawbacks. Elizabeth had remained quiet. She looked nonexistent beside Brian, whose six-foot frame and beer gut seemed to swallow our table. When there was a rare pause in his monologue, I lamely asked how he got involved in the cigarette business.

"I sell death," Brian slurred. "You gotta problem with that?"

Amy ground out her Camel Light. She'd been trying to quit for over a year.

"I guess this proves love is really blind," I ventured as we walked home. We had turned down a ride from Brian and Elizabeth.

"And sexist, and obnoxious, and mean," Amy added. The appeal of this guy was a mystery. Did Elizabeth harbor some secret preference for overbearing losers? And if she did, what did that imply about *our* company? Hoping that this, too, would pass, we ignored her romance and continued to work toward graduation.

\*\*\*

Acting the drama queen, I flung down my bookbag and announced a campus rumor. The food service was serving fried chicken and grits in commemoration of Martin Luther King's birthday. "Can you believe this?" I yelled. Amy and Elizabeth stared at me.

"Maybe you should call the menu hotline and confirm it," Amy suggested. "It may just be a sick story."

It wasn't. "Gee, why don't the cooks just dress up like Butterfly McQueen and run around the dining room saying they don't know nothin' about birthin' no babies!" I yelled. Amy shook her head.

Elizabeth shrugged. "Why are you getting so worked up about it?"

Amy frowned. "Because it's a horrible stereotype! It's racist."

"I'm writing my next column about this," I said.

Elizabeth opened a magazine. "That's not going to change anything. You'll never get rid of stereotypes." It was a unsettling, discordant response from the woman I had known for three years.

Her comment was the first item of business on the FAC agenda one night when the Sports Club was exceptionally busy. The seniors, making the most of their final undergraduate semester, bunched around tables, the bar and the dartboards. Busy nights were dangerous. Even though no one gave me a second glance at the bar, there still was the potential for trouble when my classmates were around. The bar was an uneasy Switzerland--we all respected the political cease fire and kept to ourselves.

It was just Amy and me, because Elizabeth had left for a weekend with her boyfriend, as usual. We only saw her occasionally in class. By now I wasn't the only one who actively disliked her sudden metamorphosis. Elizabeth had volunteered to set up a display of the AIDS quilt that was touring the Midwest, but wrangled Amy into taking her place when Brian called. For years the same personal ideals kept our group together, but now Elizabeth seemed

incapable of balancing her values with her boyfriend's. Amy and I hurried toward a corner table to begin our litany of complaints.

Amy's face was dark. "I can't believe Elizabeth can just blow off something like this," she snapped. "I mean, do you know what it took to get the AIDS quilt here? Drake University wanted it, but we got it first."

"I looked at the display this morning. There were about five other people there."

Amy snapped open her lighter. "Of course! Everyone here thinks, 'Oh, yeah, AIDS--that's the fag disease.' They could care less." She threw her lighter on the table and flopped back in her chair.

I rearranged my napkin and straw.

Amy smoked quickly. "I've gone to see that quilt every day since it got here. And I always cry. There were some professors who didn't even want it to come here." She blew out a line of smoke. "Elizabeth probably feels the same way now, who knows."

"She said she wants to move in with Brian."

Amy sat up. "What about graduate school?"

I shrugged. Amy mashed out her cigarette and shoved the ashtray across the table.

Had I been using my head, I would have ordered a soda, as usual, and listened to the music, as usual, and tried not to make any waves. As happy hour passed and our complaints against Elizabeth continued--she's neglecting her studies, she quotes Brian incessantly, she's selling out on her values--I kept ordering beers until the room became fuzzy. The music was more of a steady pounding than an intelligible tune. Glancing up, I saw Amy rubbing her eyes.

"I have to say this," she muttered. "I have to tell you something."

By this point in the semester, by this point in our friendship, I knew. Amy went to see her friends in Omaha every weekend. She'd been one of the most outspoken proponents to

bring the AIDS quilt to campus. It snuck into our conversations and fed our anxiety toward our classmates. I'd figured it out. The farm kid had finally smartened up.

I leaned forward to ensure that no one overheard. "You're coming out of the closet."

Amy stared at me. "How did you know?" she asked. "Is it really obvious? Can you just tell by looking at me?"

There was no appropriate way to explain intuition, a subtle understanding that results from spending so much time with a person. My friends' influence was the equivalent of having my head doused with water, to purge or at least dilute all of the beliefs that my family had ground into me--things my classmates still believed. Just the other day we listened to a rugby-clad sophomore assert that blacks were taking over the nation. Elizabeth didn't respond, but Amy had tediously explained the concept of economic double jeopardy. The guy merely glared her and shook his head.

I absorbed Amy and Elizabeth because they were good for me. I *learned* them.

"You've been dropping some hints lately," I said.

Amy took a deep breath. "Well, I've wanted to tell you this for awhile, but with Elizabeth and everything... you know," she began. "It's just too hard to not say anything."

She watched me closely and I avoided her eyes, stared at a plastic inflated bottle of Bud Dry. My face burned. It was embarrassment for her, or maybe for me, who was constantly battling my remnant Catholicism, the part that said such things were unacceptable. I wanted to push her back into the closet and slam the door. Poor Amy. What a chance she had taken, in the middle of our watering hole. Admitting something like this while actually on campus, though, would be even more ironic. If it ever got out, she'd wake up one morning and find her car's windshield bashed out and *dyke* spray-painted across the hood. I didn't want to witness her suffering.

I finally ventured, "Does Elizabeth know?"

Amy shook her head. "No, but I'm going to tell her." She glanced at me, then fiddled with her cigarette lighter. "Don't look like that. It makes sense to tell her. I think maybe if she personally knows someone who's gay, it might change things. Brian won't be such a force over her. Who knows. She might even remember she has friends."

The Sports Club was the only place we discussed the issue. We chose a table in the corner and asked the bartender to turn up the jukebox. There we could plan Amy's strategy for telling Elizabeth. Amy referred to it as her "trump card" to salvage a three-year friendship. I thought it seemed more like a last-ditch effort.

Apparently, Elizabeth still merited some trust, although it was hard to justify. She was now unrecognizable. The final blow had been her decision not to attend graduate school. What a waste of intelligence and potential. Somehow, Amy thought coming out to Elizabeth would bring her back, make her an ally. I held skeptical hope.

We convinced Elizabeth to sacrifice a night away from Brian to spend with us at the Sports Club. "C'mon, we only have two months left," Amy coaxed.

It was if we were onstage as the complete Friday Afternoon Club walked into the bar. Only a few townies were there--it was midterms and the partying took place at later hours. No one glanced at us. A true coward, I ordered a beer, then occupied myself with reading the specials on the wall while Amy tried to make conversation and shot me frustrated glances. Elizabeth talked about Brian and moving in with Brian after graduation and Brian's latest joke about Hillary Clinton. Amy finally cut her off.

"I'm going to go pick out some tunes," I said.

"No, you're not." Amy took a swig from her bottle, gasping. "Elizabeth, I have to tell you something, because I don't think it's fair to keep this from you. You might suspect this already, I don't know, uh, but you deserve to know for sure, because we're friends and we're going to graduate and everything's changing...." She inhaled quickly. "I'm a lesbian."

Elizabeth looked at Amy, then at me.

"I'm *not*," I added hurriedly.

Liz nodded. "Yeah. I wondered about that." She tapped her fingers and looked away.

Amy slumped in her chair, realizing her mistake. A crowd roared on ESPN as a golfer sank a putt, and I turned my head in the direction of the TV and willed it to blow up, for Amy's sake.

Elizabeth stood up and cleared her throat. "Well... I told Brian I was meeting him at six." She stretched her mouth into a tight smile and walked out.

Amy put her head on the table.

\*\*\*

One year after we celebrated my 21st birthday, we each packed up our college memorabilia and headed in a separate direction. Amy was bound for Austria, me for graduate school, Elizabeth for Brian's apartment in an industrial Iowa town. Amy and I still talk and write and spend hours trying to understand what happened. Our fearless leader had disappeared somewhere, leaving the two of us to fend for ourselves.

I went to the Sports Club once last summer, before moving away. The bar's brightness had been somewhat dulled by new sports posters and a huge bulletin board on the west wall, covered with photos of grinning collegiates. Looking closely, I saw my college enemies and drunken strangers, people smiling and raising their bottles to the camera, but there was no indication that there had ever been a Friday Afternoon Club. It seemed appropriate.

**BUNK**

It happened only a week after his funeral, so my reaction was habitual, not yet broken: I dropped my book and froze, waiting for the sound of the Life Flight helicopter to grow louder as it landed in the nearby hayfield. I would always respond in the same way when I'd see an ambulance screaming by, the possibilities racing through my mind. He'd had another stroke, another heart attack, something that had prompted the five other emergency trips he'd taken during the past year. The last time, he'd suffered a stroke, sitting next to me as we ate breakfast at a county fair.

This time, though, as I sat in a chair and panicked, the realization hit me, or rather re-hit me, that the last trip my grandfather had taken in the Life Flight helicopter was his last. I'd never heard my mother's voice shake as it did when she called me, with a simple, "He didn't make it." Four brief words. She had trouble admitting that her father could die.

For a crazy moment as I listened to the helicopter fade, I wanted to dig him up and shake him until he opened his eyes. Then it would only be a bad memory. As much as I didn't believe it, though, his passing was real, and he took with him my strongest tie to our family. Granddad died on the last day of 1994, as if he just didn't want to struggle through another year. He'd had enough.

Until I actually saw him in that glossy wooden casket, I kept waiting for him to call, or slowly walk through our front door. Dead grandparents, I thought, belonged to people who really didn't know their parents' parents, lived far from them and consequently weren't all that scathed by their passing. Those kind of grandparents sent the requisite birthday card with an indulgent five dollar bill tucked away inside. The kind that always commented on how tall you were getting, even if you'd stopped growing years ago. They hugged and kissed your cheek and maybe called you by your cousin's name.



Love for grandparents is not the same as love for parents. Grandparent love is distanced, diluted, I-promise-I-won't-spend-it-all-in-one-place love, where the investment is light and nobody gets hurt. Love for parents is closer, tensile, shot through with guilt. Everyone my age kept the loves separate. My friends would hear lengthy stories about my grandfather's dog or his more colorful quotes, but their smiling reaction was polite protocol, not empathic appreciation. Their grandfathers meant little. Nobody got hurt.

This was different. This was *my* grandfather. He lived only a cornfield away. I saw him all the time. He tossed a \$50 bill at me when I graduated from high school, and only waved his hand away when I thanked him.

It's an unconscious phenomenon, but you tend to emulate the person who makes the biggest impression on you. Granddad taught me that swearing was cathartic, speed limits are for cowards, and hard work pays off. He was a registered Republican, but thought for himself instead of along a party line: to him, Hillary Clinton was "the only smart one in Washington" and Bob Dole was a "phony bastard."

"I wish somebody would yank that goddamn pencil out of his hand," he'd mutter.

He thought for himself on every issue and let us know exactly how he felt. Typically unresponsive, the rest of the family would simply listen and nod. We only needed one spokesman. Nobody vied for his role. My grandfather took no prisoners.

His monologues were studies in concentration, as he would hone in on the commentators from "The McNeill-Lehrer Hour" and responded to their political analyses. This was no hick farmer with a head full of ignorance.

"See that guy?" he asked. "He chased some burglar out of his house with a shotgun." My grandfather chuckled. "Supports the Brady Bill and owns a gun." He shook his head. I learned early to keep an eye on politics.

*Now* who was I going to talk to?

\*\*\*

I always had one strike against me because I was "just a girl," a useless gender to a family that relies on boys to keep the farm going. And I was the youngest granddaughter, at that. Strike two.

Still, I was his favorite granddaughter, or maybe even his favorite *grandchild*, if anything because I was the only one who'd had no brushes with the law. I was lippy and strong-willed and mirrored his own characteristics. Leaning close to me during a family meal one Christmas, my grandfather had muttered a message for me to relay to a teasing cousin. Five years old, my feet inches above the floor, I repeated to the offender, "Steve, go to hell!" Amid my aunts' shocked admonishments that Santa was certain to avoid me this year, Granddad threw his head back and laughed, happy to find someone else who fought back. Finally.

Five years later, he would be the reason I wasn't destroyed by my parents' divorce. Even before the split, Granddad was there, his influence in my life as strong and loud as his voice. Really, *really* loud. For every occasion when my father's concerns took precedent over his children's, my grandfather filled in the void--graduations, birthdays, down to the little details of my life. While Dad asked me what I was going to do after college, Granddad was helping me decide where I was going to graduate school. The choices were narrowed down to Arizona State and Iowa State.

"Well," Granddad pondered. "It's good weather in Arizona. Gets pretty damn hot, though."

"It's either Tempe or Ames," I replied.

"Oh," he exclaimed. "Well, Ames is a real nice town, real nice!"

Ames it was, then. Something had kept me in close proximity to my family, although at the time I didn't fully realize that the reason was sitting in a worn gold recliner, reading *The Des Moines Register* and yelling at the TV.

The wake was the only family reunion where I couldn't hear Granddad's voice booming over everyone else's. But I kept listening for him. Visitation hours lasted from one until eight during that long Saturday, so I marked the time by moving from one pew to another. A Catholic wake is an exercise in patience.

Everyone milled around the room, carefully keeping a safe distance from the casket. They only wanted to see him once--a second glance ran the risk of losing control. My family takes a perverse pride in their Irish facade. I was very wrong for trying to break that code as I sat down next to my cousin.

"I think it's nice there are so many bouquets," I ventured. "That says a lot, that he had so many friends. Everyone liked Granddad."

"Yeah," my cousin said. He unfolded his 6'3" frame and moved to another pew. For those who betrayed the vow of silence, isolation was punishment. I'd forgotten myself. In the few months I'd been in graduate school and away from my family, their training was already beginning to weaken.

My family spoke in hushed tones, in anticipation. We were all waiting for *Bob*. That's how everyone said it, *Bob*, like a crowd expecting the main attraction after the opening act has performed. He was my grandfather's younger brother, the unstable one. My relatives talked in contrasts: Granddad was the responsible one, Bob was the hell-raiser. Granddad took care of his family, Bob ditched his wife and ran around the country. When my great-grandfather would hide out in Des Moines speakeasies, it was Granddad who dragged him home and Bob who would protest for just one more round. When he finally arrived, I had to smile. Bob the wild one was eighty-two.

He walked slowly up to the casket and looked at his brother. As Bob sat down in the pew in front of me and wiped his nose and eyes with an old red handkerchief, I unwillingly stared at the back of his head. My grandfather and Bob could have passed for twins. Even their necks had the same diamond-shaped creases. The identical flat nose, fringe of white hair, waving hand gestures, voice--Bob's a little huskier from the cigarettes Granddad had given up "when they went up a dime in price," circa 1940. I kept seeing my grandfather, but it wasn't my grandfather. A mean trick.

When he turned to speak to someone, Bob's bottom teeth gleamed strangely white despite his smokes. Once when they were playing baseball, Granddad accidentally caught his brother in the mouth with the bat. It took twenty-five minutes to drive Bob to the dentist in the Model T, both of them swearing a blue streak about the running blood and the missing teeth, and of course, the postponed ball game. Evidently their team had been ahead by quite a few runs.

I'd have to ask Bob to tell that story.

\*\*\*

My grandmother, Queen of Propriety, sat in the front pew and spoke to every visitor and acted like this was no more disturbing than our annual Memorial Day picnic. Everyone was mannered, saddened, how did he die, where should the contributions be sent? She answered every comment and question obediently.

I didn't recognize the young bearded man who was trailed by a group of Paul Bunyan clones, all suspiciously clad in flannel and cowboy boots. Grandma did, though--they were the local ambulance drivers. The guy sat down next to her, talking earnestly. He'd also been one of the collection of high schoolers Granddad hired for summer help.

"Mrs. Hoover, I was the driver last... November, was it? He had that stroke? Yeah, well, we had him stabilized, and I could hear him in the back of the truck, laughin' at

something. So when I asked him what was so funny, he said, 'You couldn't drive when you were sixteen, and you still can't drive worth a damn.'"

I didn't tell Grandma I'd already listened to the story when she repeated it to me later. I wanted to hear it again. Quietly, gesture-less, she retold the tale and laughed a little at the end. Her audience politely smiled.

She'd spent the past year with my grandfather, never leaving him. My mother ran grocery errands for her. I would drive them to the doctor during breaks from school. On the last day of the year, Grandma turned away for one second to get his toothbrush, and he was gone. In an odd way, it seemed like the ultimate loyalty. He must have waited through the year and the pain for that one moment, so that she wouldn't have to see him leave.

\*\*\*

My cousin Steve sat down next to me in the lounge area. "I read your article," he said. "Pretty interesting." I'd written about my grandparents for my college newspaper.

Maybe it was Steve who was the favorite grandchild after all. He held more fidelity than the rest of our cousins, constantly writing from college and later visiting from his home in Kansas City. I was willing to concede Favorite Grandchild to him because he would appreciate the title.

Steve's tie was crooked. He was staring sightlessly at the opposite wall. His wife was milling around somewhere, flashing her new sapphire ring and checking her hair. She had no access to the family's grief. None of the in-laws did.

"Do you remember that Christmas when we were sitting at the dining room table and I told you to go to hell?" I said it in a rush, not to lose his attention.

His face was blank. "What?"

"Oh, it was years ago," I added. "A long time ago. I don't know, maybe it wasn't Christmas. But we were all sitting at the table, and you were giving me a hard time about

something, and Granddad told me to tell you to go to hell.... " My words weren't connecting. "So I did," I finished.

Steve indulged me with a fake nod of recognition. "Oh, yeah," he said. "It wouldn't surprise me."

We sat for a minute in silence while I tried to think of other topics we held in common. I liked my cousin, or what I knew of him. He was more like a polite stranger I'd recognized at a public occasion--I knew his name, had met him before, but really had nothing to say to him.

\*\*\*

I walked into a small, isolated room at the end of a hall. My aunts' grief had been catalyzed into a large buffet of sandwiches, salads and pots of coffee. Periodically one of them would sneak into the room to make sure that everyone was eating, everyone was keeping up their strength, everyone was maintaining normalcy. Even if it meant carrying around a plate of food that would remain untouched.

My brother was sitting alone.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I'm tired of everyone calling me Rod." Several older visitors had mistaken my brother for our cousin.

"I figured you'd stay near the food," I joked. Matt constantly ate in an attempt to fill his lanky frame. "Do you want a sandwich?"

"No."

I stared at him. "You don't?"

"I'm not hungry."

I sat down. My brother fiddled with a styrofoam cup.

Matt was the youngest grandchild. Our cousins raced away from the farm and the family, but my brother stayed, first because he had to and finally because he wanted to. It was

a banner day when Granddad hired Matt's help over that of a nearby cousin. My brother had openly gloated.

"I don't think he would have liked all of this hoopla," I blurted.

Matt looked up.

"He would have thought all of the flowers and the ceremony and the food was just bull."

Matt pitched his cup into the trash.

I tried again. "We should all be drunk. *That's* the problem. We should all do shots of schnapps and toast Granddad." I laughed.

My brother stretched out his legs. "Well... I must admit, I cried in the emergency room."

Some lint on my shirt attracted my attention. "Well, of course! I mean, why shouldn't you? You know, it was, uh, that's okay if you did."

Mom told the story differently. Matt had *sobbed*, covered his face, stood in the middle of our family and showed them that their love of decorum meant nothing to him. He had the right to mourn the disappearance of yet another father figure. There was something satisfying in the image of my aunts and uncles, nervously circled around a nineteen-year-old kid who they could no longer control. They must have been at a loss.

Granddad never participated in their social etiquette. He'd taken us to Pizza Hut for my twenty-first birthday, and while Matt and I behaved ourselves and refrained from arguing, Granddad looked around the restaurant, shook his head and declared, "There sure are a lot of fat people in here tonight!" My brother choked on his Dr Pepper. I had pressed my mouth against smiling, guiltily thinking of how my friends would react to the comment. They never quite understood my loyalty to a mere grandparent.

The diplomatic tones of the funeral director's voice floated into the room. Matt stood up. "I guess I'd better be going back." He stopped in the doorway. "I'm going to punch the next person who calls me Rod."

\*\*\*

While the priest droned on, I glanced around the side room that was reserved for close family only, decently sheltering any outbursts of grief from the rest of the congregation. Such a precaution was unnecessary. I looked at one of my uncles, sitting solitary with his head in his hands, as if pondering some deep philosophical issue. Another uncle and aunt sat in the far corner, unmoving and seemingly unmoved. Several empty chairs separated our family into isolated groups.

I focused on my cream-colored funeral program, which I'd already folded into a paper airplane and other origami shapes. *Mr. Don Hoover* was printed in gold, curly script. Once at the state fair, Granddad strolled through the cattle barn, me hurrying behind, watching him acknowledge the younger dairymen who knew his reputation more than his person. "Hey, Hoover," "How's it going, Hoover?" they asked innocently.

"Hi, Mr. Hoover," one man said as he swept up errant straw.

I almost collided into his back when Granddad stopped short. "Thank you," he'd said gruffly. "Thank you for using 'Mister.'" *Mr. Don Hoover*. Respect authority where you find it.

I wrapped my coat around me as we filed out of the funeral home. This was the coldest day of the year, which wasn't much of a record considering that it was only January third. During the drive to the cemetery, I rubbed my hands together and stared at the winter-dead fields. Everything was brown, even the mounds of snow alongside the highway.

Our long line of cars pattered behind the hearse at 45 miles an hour. "We're going too slowly," I pointed out. Granddad would have been impatient with the procession. His driving



record was littered with speeding tickets. It was a remnant habit that persisted decades after his traveling to state fairs ended, the love of watching scenery through a fast-moving windshield. Grandma always asked him to slow down.

I twisted around and focused on my brother. "We should be speeding."

Perhaps ashamed of his earlier admission, my brother just shrugged and looked out the window, dismissing my attempt to share a memory. I stopped smiling.

It was ridiculous to expect more than my family could give. Two years earlier, my cousin's death had been a graphic harbinger--why hadn't I paid attention at his funeral? If the death of a three-year-old child couldn't move my family to break its placid mask, than neither would my grandfather's passing. It choked me, made me want to do something rebellious, like show up drunk and yell at everyone for being so composed. They thought I was a little odd, anyway, always hovering on the outer boundaries of the family.

When we reached the cemetery, everyone huddled under the flapping blue tarp and mentally urged the priest to hurry up. This was all wrong. Granddad despised the cold weather. In an ideal world, the day would have been scorching--87 degrees, 100 percent humidity--and the hearse driver would have gunned that black Caddy across the brilliant green stretch of field corn that swallows our houses during the summer, whipping by at full eight-cylinder capacity. Then we all would have stood in the cemetery and listened to my uncles gripe about the heat and how two inches of rain was all we needed, and that goddamn corn would really get going. Yeah, that's all, just two inches. Perfect. Granddad had recited that same litany at every Fourth of July parade, his Pioneer Seeds cap pushed back on his head.

The cold was the reason his house was fortified with both a wood stove and central heating. From November to March, the indoor thermostat was never allowed to read below 75 degrees. My brother and I sat in the basement and watched Granddad push huge chunks of wood into the stove, awed by the brilliant orange sparks that rocketed high and fizzled

before touching the ceiling. Then, sweating, the three of us would clear the floor of obstacles--coats, cast-off chairs, greasy tractor parts--and shoot an old basketball into a 10 gallon feed bucket. That was when he could still convince his hands to curl enough to palm the ball.

\*\*\*

Cows don't wait for funerals, so everyone had gone home to do the milking, leaving only a few of us to battle the ghosts in his house. I resisted the urge to go down to the basement and look into the wood stove and instead walked around the yard for a minute.

My grandfather's pup was curled into a ball in the doghouse, a rotting plywood structure that was held together mostly by paint. Which dog was this--Toby? Sam? Jigs? *Damn.* The dogs so rapidly came and went that the names were a monosyllabic blur. This one looked like a shepard mix, black and white.

"Hey, uh, Whiskers." I patted his head. His tail thumped against the dog pan. Did he sense something was wrong? Or was he oblivious to everything except whoever fills the food dish?

If the world was divided into dog and cat people, then Granddad was a dog person. The image of him driving crazily, a dog hanging on for dear life in the back of the truck, was a frequent one during the summers. My brother and I, too young to be included in the action of the family's life, were given the responsibility-laden job of helping Granddad pick out new pups. Driving for hours to some obscure town for a collie-blue heeler mix validated us. We were too small to bale hay, but damned if we couldn't determine the pup who promised to be an alert cattle dog. Granddad trusted our immature expertise.

Whiskers shivered. Poor puppy. I piled up the straw in his little shanty, then ventured inside the house.

Bob was watching "Wheel of Fortune" in the living room. I moved from chair to sofa to recliner, getting up my nerve to speak. This man didn't pay attention to basketball scores,

didn't farm, didn't know anyone in the area, didn't know me. I had nothing to say to my grandfather's mirror image.

"Pomp and circumstance!" I suddenly blurted. Vanna turned the letters on the television screen.

"You watch this?" Bob asked.

"Yeah," I admitted. Only when I was in this house. Usually that also meant sitting through a syndicated episode of the Lawrence Welk show. And Matlock. "It's interesting... to solve the puzzles," I added lamely. Bob nodded.

"So I bet it never gets this cold in Phoenix?" I asked.

"Oh, hell, no. It was about sixty the other day when I left."

I nodded, irrationally excited at the prospect of conversation. "I almost went to graduate school in Tempe, but I'm going to Iowa State instead."

"Yeah, that's what Bunk said."

Granddad's nickname was an ideal topic. Maybe there were stories behind it that I hadn't heard, information that would keep my grandfather around as long as possible. Everyone always said that memories blur, faces blur, and pretty soon your loved ones are gone and getting them back in any form is impossible. The thought panicked me. But before I could ask Bob about Granddad's name, the commercials were over and Vanna had reappeared in all her sparkling glory. Discussion over.

I already knew how he'd been nicknamed. Granddad was always full of bunk, bullshit, hot air. He never gave a straight answer. During his last heart attack, the doctor tried vainly to pry information from him, asking, "Were you able to talk at the time?"

"Of course I could talk, goddammit! I just didn't want to," my grandfather had snapped.

Evidently, neither did any of his sons or daughters or grandchildren. They emotionally fled from the biggest loss we'd ever suffered, as if muteness would make it untrue. I sat with Bob, knowing that long after he left for Phoenix, the only willing voice in that living room would be Pat Sajak's, and Matlock's, and other media images that walked through sitcom plots and hour-long mysteries, unscathed by the death of an arthritic old man.

Eventually, though, they would have to talk. Or perhaps that was my own little fantasy, a private hope that my family would suddenly break its decades of composure. I sat and waited. My grandmother and mother were in the kitchen, wrapping up food. Their discussion was industrious as they tried to arrange all of the containers in the refrigerator. It was the same conversation they had after every family holiday. I remained in the living room and eavesdropped, hoping for some abnormal word. Vanna turned the letters on TV. Bob left to help my uncle with the chores. I watched it grow dark outside and continued to wait.

## THE GENETIC SHAFT

As a word, "milestone" isn't accurate. It implies walking easily down some road, probably a smooth, cement road, no potholes, and then--surprise!--you've reached a milestone in your life and everybody celebrates. Balloons and presents, smiles and congratulations. Sure. I think a more appropriate image is a dirt road, with lots of bumps, and you can only see the milestones if you look back on the stretch you've just traveled. There should be a sign, too: "Unpaved Grade B. Drive Carefully."

So I don't use "milestone." "Revelation" is much better. It contains all of the shock and disturbance and learning that happens while you're stumbling over Grade B turf. Besides, it's easier to see revelations. It is for me, anyway, especially when I recall those in my brief adulthood, peeking out from behind my family and proudly accompanying my friends. You don't have to look back to notice them.

A "milestone" doesn't affect a person like that. Unless you trip over one.

### Revelation 1

The National Guard practices its flight patterns over my mother's house. The pounding of the blades sometimes gets so loud that the brass picture frames vibrate against the wall. My cousin Jeff once told me to walk outside and wave a twelve-gauge at the chopper. "Then see how long they'll stick around!" he'd asserted. I think he was drunk at the time.

Finals are over. Tomorrow is graduation. The alarm buzzes at seven, an evil hour after a week of little sleep. I fall out of bed and blindly stumble into my mother's living room, sprawl on her new sofa and sleep until ten. I deserve this. The sofa is too short and the material is a rough weave against my face.

It's the National Guard that wakes me up, thudding inside my head, outside of the house. Maybe I should take Jeff's advice after all. My God, how close *is* that helicopter? It

sounds as if it's landed on the roof. I stuff a sofa pillow over my face, leaving just enough space to breathe, and wait for the noise to pass.

10:30. My brother slams the front door, scaring me awake. "Well," he says, grunting and prying off his boots. "*Mmmrrrrpphh*. They Life-Flighted Granddad to the hospital this morning. *Mmmrrrrpphh*." He peels off his coveralls. "You wanna get my hiking boots? They're in my room and I got mud on my socks." Matt stands there and looks at me.

"*What?*"

"You wanna--"

"*What!* When? When did they Life-Flight him? When was this?"

"I don't know, about a half hour ago. They landed out in that south field behind the barn." Matt flicks a clump of mud off his sock.

"What's happened? Is he okay?" I'm standing on the sofa now. "What's wrong?"

My brother leans against the doorframe for support, pulling off his filthy sock. "He had a heart attack but Mom said he's stable now."

"God!" I yell. "God! Granddad gets sick and you guys just let me sleep! What the hell is wrong with you people? Where is he, at Methodist?"

Like dry newspaper, Matt's temper instantly ignites. Its volatility is always stunning to me. "Well, goddammit, I don't know, Adrienne," he yells back. "What am I supposed to do, huh? It's not my fault! I mean, God!"

I am wearing my glasses, an old prescription that blurs my world. Matt is screaming at me, stomping around the living room with arms waving. He is very thin, very pale like everyone else in our family. He has Granddad's hazel eyes, as do all of our uncles and male cousins.

But these things are imperceptible with my glasses. Matt continues to fume, and all I see before me is a blurry replica of my father. In his fits I see the worst of both our families--

defensive self-righteousness, wrapped up in Lamberti violence. Nothing's changed. I should have stayed on campus after finals.

## Revelation 2

"Maybe they can just *Life-Flight* him into the gym," I mutter. My gown is very hot. All three hundred graduating students are jammed into Smith Chapel while two faculty attempt to sort us by last name. My friend Amy is the next-to-last student. She has been directed to stand at the front of the church, near the Virgin Mary. I wave at her and she gives me the thumbs-up sign. She is wearing a blood-red ribbon for AIDS patients and it glows against the background of her black gown.

My ribbon is purple for victims of domestic abuse. It gets tangled with the white cord for Omicron Delta Kappa, a blue cord for graduating with honors, and my sorority pin. Four-star generals have less decoration. Amy drove me to Wal-Mart yesterday and we stood in the sewing section for half an hour, deciding our ribbon colors. They were our last weak symbols of liberalism. Probably no one will notice.

I look around the chapel. The women are trying to pin down their caps without crushing their stiff hair. The guy assigned to walk with me is tapping his foot impatiently. He used to call up the female editor of the newspaper and tell her to stop running articles full of femi-Nazi, bleeding-heart, liberal bullshit. I should punch him, even if it is in church. God would forgive me.

My hands sweat in the gym. CNN cameras buzz as future GOP presidential candidate Lamar Alexandar talks about his long friendship with *Roots* author Alex Haley. Alex Haley probably thought Lamar was an idiot. I give our distinguished speaker a chance until he utters the words, "American Dream," then tune him out. Up in the balcony, my advisor's ten-year-old daughter is running around happily while the rest of the crowd sits quietly. Lamar shuts

up. I'm supposed to clap now. A second rich white guy walks to the podium to hand out the valedictorian award. My hands are dripping.

Eight years ago, Granddad told me he wanted a valedictorian in the family. He'd decided it would be me. Not my cousin Steve, not my brother, not any of the other grandkids. I'd failed the goal in high school. College was my last chance. My name is called--the guy actually pronounces it correctly--and I run up to the stage, leaving my faculty escort in the dust. Shake the rich guy's hand, run off-stage. My Kappa sisters scream my name excitedly, stand up in the audience, clap loudly. Their faces are a blur as I hurry down the aisle. I can't see my family anywhere in the crowd. One of my tassels hits me in the mouth as I smile. And Granddad is lying in a hospital bed.

Dad meets me outside of the gym and in the excitement, kisses my cheek. It shocks me, feels like running into an electric fence. My mother, grandmother and brother stand nearby, primly waiting for me. They ask to see the plaque. "Oh, my, that's lovely," Grandma says. She pats my arm and smiles. Matt has taken off not only his tie but his dress shirt and now stands behind us in a ripped and stained t-shirt. Fidgeting near Dad is Grandpa Lamberti. I didn't expect to see him.

"Where's Nana?" I ask.

"Well, Nanny's not feeling so good, but she wants to tell you that she's so proud of you and you've worked real hard, real hard. She wants you to have this," Grandpa says, stuffing a check into my hand. His words are Italian-rapid and clipped. English was Grandpa's second language. As a child I mistook his accent for a speech impediment.

Grandpa looks at our group, has not seen my mother in four years, since my high school graduation. "Let's go to lunch," he states. "Where should we go? Diane, Winifred, you too, it's on me. Let's go get some lunch." He motions to my mother and grandmother.

Over Mom's head, Matt stares hard at me, mutely pleading.



I'm smart. There's a plaque in my hand to prove it. "Why don't we wait until Nana is feeling better?" I ask quickly. "And Granddad. We should all be together to celebrate."

It works. The promised lunch is post-poned. Matt's face is a study in relief. We both remember the last graduation.

"What, no roses?" I tease my mother. "Don't I even get dandelions or something for the occasion?"

She smiles. "Roses are expensive, Adrienne," she says.

The five of them stand in a wide circle, waiting for me to speak. My sorority is hosting a small reception for its seniors and parents. "I have to go down to Kappa and pick up a few things," I say. Grandma, Mom, Matt, Grandpa and Dad look at me. "It won't take long, I'll just be there a little while, and then I'll drive home," I add. They look at each other, then break ranks. I begin to move toward the Kappa house, calling, "And thanks for the check, Grandpa!"

My friends tackle me as I walk through the front door. Juli is screaming, "You got the big V!" over and over again. She's skipped her Saturday class to be here. Allissa gives me a photo album. Jennie hands me irises. Amy and I hug each other repeatedly. Karen steers me around by the arm and introduces me to all of the parents. The brass on my plaque flashes as it's passed from one person to another.

"She worked her *ass* off for this award!" Juli enthuses to a middle-aged couple. They smile at her nervously.

Someone must be smoking. It's good that Mom didn't come--she hates cigarette smoke, complains at length whenever she smells it. Grandma's hearing aides would have been useless in all this noise. She wouldn't have heard any of the conversations. Dad doesn't even know the location of this house. Only last year he found out I was in a sorority. Surely my

family wouldn't have enjoyed themselves here. The last time Mom visited Kappa, she commented that my friends were "very loud." It's good they're not here. Really.

### Revelation 3

There are two piles of clothes on Amy's bed. Her parents' house is cluttered with cardboard boxes, some that will go with Amy when she moves to her apartment in Ohio. Others have an unknown fate.

She stands next to me in a sleeveless pink shirt with a flamingo on the front and "Florida" on the back. "Is that everything from the front closet?" she asks.

I nod. "Should I look anywhere else?"

She shakes her head. "These are all my clothes." Amy grabs a heavy black sweater and moves it from the right pile to the left. "I don't think I really need this."

"Has your brother borrowed any shirts or anything?"

She shrugs. "If he has, he's welcome to them, I guess."

We continue to sort. I hold up a pair of miniature china slippers with a questioning look. Amy walks over and holds them for a minute. "My aunt gave me these before she died." She puts them in the OHIO box.

Amy's father is mowing hay a few miles north. Her mother is still at work in Omaha and won't be back until five. We're safe from her mom's watchful eyes, from her certain puzzlement as to why her daughter is being so careful in the packing process. Amy's parents have no idea that she is a lesbian. Like me, she nervously kept her college and family worlds from colliding.

I look at the pictures on the wall and take down a framed photo of Amy on her first day of school, a little five-year old with a ponytail and lunchbox. Her mother is standing behind her, smiling. "Should I wrap this in newspaper?" I ask.

She glances over and nods. "Yeah. All the pictures." We pack steadily until her parents both come home, then grill hamburgers. Amy, her brother and I toss a basketball around until it gets dark. Norman Rockwell would have approved.

We try to move all of the boxes the next morning, before it gets too hot. By noon, everything has been duct taped, labeled and sorted. Her room is a skeleton of its former self. I stretch as Amy ties down the trunk of her car. There is a gay pride rainbow sticker in the back window. "Mom told me it was pretty," she says, laughing. There are sweat lines running down our faces.

"There should be a law against temperatures over ninety degrees," I gasp. The heat has been our primary conversation since we started packing. Our voices are stifled in this house.

Amy's mother surveys our work. "I think it's really nice of you to help Amy with all of this," she tells me. "That girl has so much stuff."

My smile must look fake. I've felt increasing anger during the past few days at this family, their inability to accept all of Amy. She has carved herself into pieces, showing some, hiding others. I know that feeling. Thank God for my friends.

Two boxes of Amy's clothes, old school books, and knickknacks are in my car, to be stored in my own apartment. Our friend Juli said she will store three more boxes at her place. The past two days of packing have been careful and tedious, there is only so much that Amy can move. She has had to decide what things she can bear leaving, possibly forever.

Scattered throughout Iowa, our friends have promised room for Amy's material life as well as for Amy. Once she gets to Ohio, she is coming out to her family. The letter has been written for months, revised and revised and revised. The envelope is addressed and stamped. It's in Amy's glove compartment.

She expects her parents to destroy everything she left behind.

We hug before I leave. "Thanks for everything," she whispers. "If I didn't have any friends right now, I'd be screwed."

#### Revelation 4

My roommate's vacuum is only slightly effective, but I keep running it over the carpet anyway. I maneuver it around the TV stand, trying to pick up some lint, and that's when I realize that Granddad is dead and I can't call him and I'll never see him again. There's nothing I can do to change this. I'm so angry I could pick up the vacuum and throw it through the big north window. That bastard.

He couldn't wait one more year, to see the first woman in the family earn her graduate degree? Why did my stupid cousins get his company for so many years before I was even born? In my childhood, the days of pre-feminism, I wanted *him* to walk me down the aisle at my wedding, not Dad. It never was Dad.

The experts say that mourning takes a year. It's September, nine months after Granddad died. Still warm, still green outside, farmers crossing Ames highways in combines. Basketball season. I watched a Cyclone player topple over the water stand during a game yesterday. He would have chuckled at that. My first reaction was to pick up the phone and tell him about it, before I remembered. I could have called Grandma, but there's death in her voice. Even if no one else hears it, I do.

He's gone. And there's nothing I can do to change this. I can't do anything. I say it to myself several times, to make sure. Really, I can't do anything about it? There are no possibilities? *Really?* Wouldn't Mom be happy--wouldn't Grandma be thrilled--if I could fix everything. Wouldn't the whole family inflate back into normalcy again. The granddaughter, an unlikely savior.

Stupidly, I stand in the living room and try to think of a way to remedy the fact that Granddad is dead. It's been years, probably since third grade math class, when I couldn't

come up with any answers. I stand and stare and concentrate. A roommate has written "Hi" on the dust covering the TV screen. Each pixel separates and glitters. Think, think. Something makes me believe I really could find with an solution. The rational side of me laughs, knock it off. You're being an idiot. Clean up this place. Do your homework. You're alone in your powerlessness. Ha ha.

If a roommate walked in right now, all she would see is my blank face looking at a blank TV screen. My friends can sympathize only so much for what I've lost. Beyond that is a point they can't enter, a murky gray area of family secrets and anger and history. An area still sore enough to make me want to throw an appliance out the window. They can't help me there.

So I shut off the vacuum. It's been pushed over the same patch of carpet for the past five minutes. Everyone can clean up their own damn messes.

#### Final Revelation

My brother is alone. Matt's been alone since he finished his agriculture classes and moved back to our mother's house. Now and then he'll call me at my apartment in Ames.

"What're you up to?" he asks.

"Oh, the same as always. Doing homework, checking papers."

"Homework.... " Matt makes a revolted sound. "Why do you wanna do that?"

"What are *you* doing?" I ask.

"Oh, nothing. Just calling to see what's going on." The conversations last a little over a minute.

So I have invited him to a Halloween party at my apartment, have warned him that it will be no more than a group of my friends, hanging around, drinking beer. Graduate student stuff. He says he'll come anyway. "This isn't a cowboy boots crowd, just in case you're wondering," I tell him.

This will be good for him, much better than staying at home with Mom and watching that horrible Dick Van Dyke hospital show on Friday night. "Will you talk to him?" I ask a male friend. "Matt isn't a man of many words." Everyone wants to meet my little brother, the rodeo rider, the farm kid. My two worlds are colliding. I pace until the sound of his muffler-less truck roars outside the apartment.

Matt arrives late. He is wearing his dirty coveralls and a black polyester DMACC School of Agribusiness jacket. I stare for a minute. "Did you just get off work?" I ask. That can be the only excuse for his appearance. He knows that silver belt buckles and the smell of manure aren't common here.

My friends call him by name and wave--they've been briefed. "Hey," Matt responds. I run through introductions quickly. My hands are gesturing too much. He stands for a moment, hands in his pockets, then asks me to help him with something in his truck. I walk outside with him, confused.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Matt reaches his truck, then spins around. "Is that guy a fag?" he asks.

I stare. "What?"

"That tall guy in there, the one with the earrings. He's a fag, isn't he?"

I stand in the apartment parking lot. My mouth won't work. It has never worked well. "He's bisexual," I finally sputter, and then, "There's nothing wrong with that."

Matt slams his hand on the hood of his truck, what used to be Granddad's truck. I jump. "Goddammit, I never would've come if I thought there was gonna be a fag here," he gasps. "That's sick, Adrienne! It *is* wrong, that's *disgusting*." He pounds the hood again.

The sound is like a bullet through me. I continue to gape in the parking lot and my head reels. This is how far I've wandered, standing halfway between my family and my friends. The loyalty of a blood tie is strangling. It's the genetic shaft. And halfway is an

illusion--the middle ground I'd stood upon for the past several years is rapidly vanishing. Matt stares at me, waiting for my usual acquiescence.

It would be so easy to slip back into the role my family made for me.

My friends would tell me to forget my family.

I find my voice and make my decision.

"He's been nicer to me than you ever have," I snap. "You can just get the hell out of here if that's the way you feel." I take several steps backwards from him, still not fully believing that this is my family in front of me. "I give up," I add. My hands are shaking at him. "I give up on you. *Go home.*"

Matt glares at me for a minute, then throws up his hands, half-shakes his head in a perfect imitation of our father. "Fine. Whatever!" he snaps. He jumps into his truck. The ignition dies three times before my brother guns the pickup and roars away, furious at my laughter. And maybe a little scared by the sound of my voice.